

# The INQUIRER

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians  
and Free Christians

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space*

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# The INQUIRER

THE UNITARIAN AND FREE CHRISTIAN PAPER

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The Inquirer is the oldest

Nonconformist religious newspaper

**"To promote a free and inquiring religion through the worship of God and the celebration of life; the service of humanity and respect for all creation; and the upholding of the liberal Christian tradition."**

*From the Object passed at the  
General Assembly of the Unitarian and  
Free Christian Churches 2001*

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## Inquiring Words

### In your hands

I invite you into a space of quiet and peace, to ground yourself by noticing your contact with chair and floor, by sitting straight, by becoming aware of your breathing. Look at your hands. They've been through a lot, those hands ... they have strengths, scars, beauty.... I invite you to remember that it is your hands that do the work of love in the world. These hands may hold another's hands. These hands may type emails to politicians, sign cards of consolation and congratulation. These hands may patiently teach, quilt works of beauty or write words urging peace. These hands may bath children, feed elders, nurse the ill, work the earth, organise communities. These hands clasp in prayer, open in release, grasp in solidarity, clench in righteous anger. These hands are God's hands, your hands, our hands; a great mystery of flesh and intention, a great potential of embodied love.

*Christine C Robinson*

### Crystal of Creation

If there is a heaven, it is right here, right now,  
in this particular arrangement of nature,  
this happening of earth, moon, and star,  
this constellation of instants,  
this laden moment,  
this flash of recognition,  
this particle of time.

If there is a god, it is all around us, everywhere,  
in every blinking eye,  
in every pulsing possibility,  
in every ugliness, every beauty,  
in every wholeness, every part.  
If there is an axiom in the universe  
it is life,  
it is love,  
it is death,  
it is hatred,  
it is wanting and needing to be  
in this crystal of creation.

*Tess Baumberger*



# Finding the sacred in stillness

By Margaret Kirk

In one of our publications, *Green and Dying* there's a story written by John Midgley about an elderly woman living in central Europe who sets out from her fairly humble home in a block of flats in the middle of a city to find her place of worship. She enters an office block that looks derelict, she climbs up one flight of stairs after another, very slowly until she eventually reaches a small door. Her face shows the satisfaction of having arrived in her church: 'two small poorly lit rooms rented at lowest cost by her little congregation ... a few rows of chairs, a table, lectern and a chalice candle. This is her church.'

John writes: 'This is her church. Some impulse to be in a sacred space, be it just for a little while, drives her. Some inward energy, to which she must respond, makes her focus her heart and mind on where she wants to be: her church, her place, her friends. To sing, to think, to listen, perhaps to pray, just to be here where she can be herself, a place that makes a difference.'

That story always reminds me of another elderly lady who died a couple of years ago. She was a member of the small congregation at Whitby; she had her own key to the chapel which is in a very central place in the town, although it's hidden away. Almost every day, she would get on the bus from where she lived, do a bit of shopping and then go to the church where she firstly had to unlock the passage door to get to the church and then unlock the door of the church itself and there she would sit quietly. Often for half an hour or so on her own.

Sometimes curious visitors would come in, and she would regale them with the most amazing stories about the chapel's history — none of them bearing any resemblance to the truth. She was quite a confused lady. But not confused about her church. It was her church. Her holy space. In the midst of her confusion about the things she was supposed to do, appointments she should keep, things she was supposed to remember but failed to, the one place that centred her, the place where she found herself, that was her anchor, was this little early 18<sup>th</sup> century chapel that had seen better days; hidden away, down a passageway. If you know Whitby, you know all about the passageways — a place she had been associated with since young adulthood.

Holy places don't have to be churches.

For many people Holy places are encountered outside buildings, associated strongly with nature. Worship itself is associated strongly with nature. Pagan rituals of worship are almost entirely associated with nature. For many of us, the sense of holiness, our appreciation of the natural world and our desire to celebrate that world are very closely linked.

Consider how many traditions have a sense of holy space, quite separate from a building: there's the Native American Indian circle around which the tipis are erected; they roamed the plains to find a place for their tents — always organised in a circle and in the centre was a place called Hocoka where they would assemble — that is their Holy Space.

The Desert Fathers of the 3rd and 4th centuries in Egypt and Syria and Palestine found a different kind of Holy Space in the desert — a place of trial and testing; a confrontation with self, an encounter with God. Many of the people attracted to desert spirituality were trying to escape from the towns and cities



*The sanctuary at Ditchling. The cover photo shows St Necton's Glen in Cornwall, traditionally King Arthur's christening place. Both photos by James Barry.*

because they needed a simpler life style, because they felt their spirit was stifled.

I don't want to over romanticise: people escaped to the desert for many reasons. Some were looking for a refuge from persecution, some were trying to avoid military service, some were trying to avoid punitive taxation, some were trying to avoid the arm of the law, many were unhappy with the church as it tried to accommodate itself to more worldly things and some people were there because they were so full of self loathing that they wanted to place themselves in the most testing situation they could find, to punish themselves.

But for whatever reason the desert was a place of simplicity and rigour; silence, solitude, the extremities of heat and cold, the constant struggle to survive, the need for water, having to live life with total commitment. Because of all these extraordinary elements and the immensity and scale of the landscape, for most people that encounter it, the desert is holy space.

It is, of course, the scene of the great Exodus of the Israelites — taking them to the Promised Land. Another scene of transition. And in that state of transition we are, quite simply, waiting.

Alessandro Pronzato, has written a lot about his experiences of the desert. He says: "In the desert the most urgent thing is to wait. The desert does not take kindly to those who tackle it at breakneck speed, subjecting it to their plans and deadlines. It soon takes its revenge and makes them pay dearly for their presumption. Instead, the desert welcomes those who shed their sandals of speed and walk slowly in their bare feet, letting them be caressed and burnt by the sand...."

I'm also reminded of those wonderful lines written by the Sufi mystic and poet Rumi, where he celebrates the sense in which we are always moving into new pastures of holiness:

He says:

*(Continued on next page)*



# The sacred can be found many places

(Continued from previous page)

"Come, come, whoever you are

Wanderer, worshipper,

Lover of leaving,

Ours is no caravan of despair

Come yet again come."

'Wanderer, lover of leaving, caravan ... nothing is fixed, no one place is sacred – it's about movement, transition: a wonderful metaphor for Unitarianism!

Coming closer to home, there's the Celtic tradition which from its very early beginnings had deep, deep connection with the natural world. This natural world offers holy space: rivers, streams, valleys, green pastures, woodlands. Turn to almost any page of the writings of John O'Donoghue, the great Celtic spiritual philosopher and you are enveloped in this sense of holiness. Like this piece from *Eternal Echoes*:

"When you find a place in nature where your mind and heart find rest, then you have discovered a sanctuary for your soul. The west of Ireland landscape offers welcoming shelter to the soul. You can go to places in the limestone mountains where you are above the modern world: you will see nothing from the 20 centuries. There is only the subtle sculpture that rain and wind has indented on the stone."

There are very few of us who have not had the experience at some time in our lives, maybe very regularly, of that sense of nature providing holy space. As Celtic Christianity developed on the west side of Britain, Celtic Christian monks built their monasteries in holy places in holy surroundings.

With that kind of experience, it's almost as though we're asking nature to tell us who we are and where we belong. It's the east coast of Britain, that I'm much more familiar with, and that too has been influenced by the Celtic sense of holy space through the ministries of St. Hilda at Whitby, St Aidan and St. Cuthbert especially further up the coast in Northumbria. I've always considered it was an enormous sadness that the Roman model of Christianity overruled the Celtic model at the Synod of Whitby in the year 664 and that the much more free-flowing spirit of Celtic Christianity that, who knows, might have accommodated even Unitarianism, was stopped in its tracks.

I can remember being moved to write a meditation for *The Inquirer* in celebration of the Celtic spirit, I said:

"Before Augustine's Roman rule clamped the wandering spirit and taught stabilitas, theirs was a truly winged freedom,

They celebrated rock, sea, wind and water — all that matter is."

And I think I must have been influenced by Cathy Galloway when I wrote that. Cathy Galloway, minister of the Church of Scotland and member of the Celtic Iona Community, speaking straight from the heart of the Celtic spirit, the spirit that was suppressed by Roman legalism:

"I get really mad," she says, "when I hear people say that we have got to get away from materialism and get back to spiritual values. The two are one. The problem is not that we are too materialistic. The problem is that we are not materialist enough. We do not love things enough; we do not love bodies enough; we do not love the ordinary enough for their own sake, for their intrinsic worth, not for their extrinsic utility. We need to love the stoneness of stone and the wateriness of water, the fleshiness of flesh and the bloodiness of blood."

There you have it – this wonderful rootedness in place and in the elements. The vicar of Holy Island, David Adams, has followed in that same Celtic tradition. On the other hand we have the holy places that burst into bloom, sometimes quite unexpectedly, on the journey of life; that are created out of moments of togetherness or moments of solitude.

Ben Okri, in 'Birds of Heaven', says: "We need more of the wordless in our lives, we need more stillness, more of a sense of wonder, a feeling for the mystery of life, we need more love, more silence, more deep listening, more deep giving."

At our General Assembly meetings in 1977, then-professor of Peace Studies at Bradford University Adam Curle, a practising Quaker, delivered the Essex Hall Lecture. In it he described how we live in a world cluttered with stimuli so that our mind behaves rather like an over active computer, constantly processing information at high speed, never free from the activity of this computer. Even at quieter times he says, we are aware of a constant flickering flow of thoughts, feelings, memories, ideas, some pleasant, some unpleasant as one association triggers off another."

And he says we pay a heavy price for this because the constant noise drives out the ability to listen to more subtle sounds.

He tells this story of how some of his Native American friends behave when they come to visit him: "When my Native American friends come to visit me, they would sit very quietly for a few minutes. They were stilling the noise of their own thoughts and feelings so that they could better listen, not only to my words, but to my feelings, to sense my mood, and to understand what they could best do to help, encourage or strengthen me; and this they were always able to do."

Quieting ourselves, switching off the computer, waiting, as the Quakers say for the moving of the spirit, I think this is an important part of worship. I think of it as a healing process where the fragmented bits and pieces of ourselves are restored to us.

Deep nourishing silence in the midst of our worship, moments of meditation, space for ourselves in the midst of daily tasks, moments of quiet contemplation when we're alone in a beautiful place. This is creative silence.

Does our society value the need for solitude? Far more importance is attached to our socialising skills. Education has overlooked a child's need to be alone, seeing it as something anti-social or rather odd, forgetting that a child's creative and imaginative resources are more likely to be fostered when they have opportunities for solitude.

Many of the most beautiful things that we encounter in life are met by silence rather than by speech: the end of a piece of music before the applause, acts of kindness that take us by surprise, moments of personal intimacy, standing before a work of art and being amazed by its colour or its form or its texture. There is a wondrous quality about these experiences that is a form of worship because it induces a sense of silent awe.

As the great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart tells us, "there is nothing in all creation so like God as stillness."

*The Rev Margaret Kirk is minister at York. This is an excerpt from a theme talk she gave at Great Hucklow Summer School 2006. For information on Summer School see: [www.unitariansocieties.org.uk](http://www.unitariansocieties.org.uk).*



# Beyond the hymn sandwich

By Kate Taylor

Some Unitarian congregations welcome experimental approaches to worship. But has anyone other than Wakefield's Stephen Carlile ever made a batch of Yorkshire puddings during a service?

The Lindsey Press Panel is hoping in due course to publish a collection of 'recipes' for alternatives to the hymn sandwich. It was the thought of this compilation that led me to attend a symposium in November on Alternative Forms of Worship, held at Unitarian College, Manchester.

Both the speakers were from the United Reformed Church (URC). Stuart Radcliffe focused on the value of information technology and, in particular, of presentations on screen of images put together on a computer. He observed that we have been conditioned to suppose that we must behave in a particular way, principally sitting and listening, in services. We need an enriched sensory experience. Images can strike a spiritual chord within us. Icons are, after all, a part of church tradition. PowerPoint presentations are simply an updating of this tradition. Worship should be *experience*, and images – if we use them – should deepen our experience of knowing God. I found particularly attractive his suggestion that a PowerPoint presentation of someone's life might be provided as part of a funeral service. He also pointed out that, if you projected the words onto a screen, you could draw on hymns that are not in the chapel's standard hymn books.

The second speaker, Dr Jan Berry, told us about a Café Church. Now this was a really fun idea! And it is something that is happening in Chorlton, just outside Manchester. It is, we were told, a blurring of the distinction between the spiritual and the secular. There are key ingredients: sharing food together as in a communion service, the chance to move about and do your own thing, choice, flexibility, creativity, and, of course, worship. The URC chapel that has experimented with this hired a real cafe. Different spaces were created. There is a quiet area, for meditation. There is an area for discussion – perhaps of some aspect of social justice. There is an area for craft work. There is an area for sharing 'stories' – people's concerns and experiences. We were advised that the range of activities should be fairly limited on any one evening and that it is important to have a warm welcome and then a clear 'menu' so that people know what is to happen or what is on offer. It is, our speaker suggested, about finding God in the everyday.

But to return to mixing batter. Stephen's service was about the different 'ingredients' that go into a chapel congregation. He demonstrated how the batter can go wrong but he also showed how to mix perfect Yorkshire puddings (in the tradition of his grandmother) – and, since he had nipped into the kitchen with the bowl of batter during a hymn – we got to eat them after the service.

'It seems to me,' Stephen said in his address, 'that churches can be a bit like Yorkshire puddings. We have our oil, it keeps things moving, and without it, we'd quickly get stuck. We have our flour, those people who don't seem that outstanding, but are a very stable and staple part of our church. We have our eggs, people who are versatile and have a wide range of uses, though, like the eggs they can expand and get a little out of control if the heat gets too much. The milk helps us to create as it loosens everything up and helps all the other ingredients



Stephen Carlile mixed up a batch of Yorkshire puddings at a service at Westgate Chapel, Wakefield. Each of the ingredients represented a different type of member of a congregation. At the end, everyone at the service enjoyed the results of Stephen's culinary efforts. Photo by Kate Taylor.

to work together. It brings together the different elements that wouldn't normally come together and helps things work as a whole. Then we come to the salt. Jesus said of his followers that they are salt and light. He asked what use salt would be if it lost its saltiness. It would be no good at all. In these health conscious days we frown on poor old salt because we have too much of it in our diet, but in Jesus' day it was very valuable. Salt has a wonderful quality in that it brings the flavours out of other things. We have people like that in churches. In themselves they don't seem to do much, but they can bring the very best out in other people. They don't seek the limelight for themselves, but are happy for other people to shine, and do their best.'

Any reader who would like to submit an idea for an alternative service for possible inclusion in the projected book is invited to contact me at 19 Pinder's Grove, Wakefield, WF1 4AH or [kate@airtime.co.uk](mailto:kate@airtime.co.uk).

Kate Taylor is a member of Westgate Chapel, Wakefield.



John Midgley retires

# Jazz and joy in the air at Cross

By Peter Sampson

What a wonderful day it was! The last Sunday of January saw the triumphant conclusion of the ministry of Rev John Midgley at Cross Street Chapel in the heart of Manchester. The day began early for some in the kitchen preparing food and wine and setting the tables for the lunch that was to follow the service.

*Roundelay*, the choir based at the Chapel, sounded the note of affirmation with the William Matthias setting of *Lift up your heads O ye gates!* The Rev Celia Midgley, President of the General Assembly brought greetings and spoke of John as a minister through and through. In a career aptitude test undertaken some years ago, John's psychological type placed him in the group, 'clergy, all denominations'! She went on to commend the congregation and minister for the way we had worked together and led us in a Prayer of Community.

The Rev Keith Gilley's address focused on the affection in which the congregation has held John, witnessed by the appreciations in the current issue of the chapel calendar. Keith recalled he had taken part in John's induction service 10 years ago and spoke of the symbolic gifts presented in that service: a glass chalice for worship, a book for thought and learning, flowers for pastoral care and a bowl of fruit representing food and fellowship. All commitments made by both sides in that induction had been honoured. He then quoted the poet Lorca:

*The poem, the song, the picture,  
is only water drawn from the people,  
and it should be given back to them  
in a cup of beauty so that they may drink,  
and in drinking understand themselves.*

He commended John for maintaining the Wednesday Lunchtime services as a spiritual oasis in the heart of the city and for his understanding of Unitarian faith, as distinct from Unitarian religion, as being much deeper; more personal insight and commitment than the observance of creeds and liturgies. He quoted favourite lines from Tennyson (*Ulysses*), used at the induction 10 years ago:

*...that which we are, we are:  
One equal temper of heroic hearts  
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will  
To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield.*

Characteristically, John opened his response with a quotation from a Garrison Keillor Lake Wobegon story, in which Father Emil steps down as pastor after 40-some years at Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility saying, 'This is a community in which, if you don't plant seeds in the spring, you plan to be planted yourself.' He chose as his favourite reading a passage from T.H. White (in *The Gift of the Ordinary*, Skinner House). Merlin advises the young Arthur, 'Learn why the world wags,



The Rev John Midgley conducts his last service as minister at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester. The Rev Jane Barraclough, recently of Bethnal Green Church will soon start at Cross Street Chapel. Photo by John Hewerdine.

and what wags it.'

John commended the words of the late John O'Donohue: 'If religion is a journey, it is a quarter of an inch long, and many miles deep.' Recalling that his interview for training for the ministry had been held at Cross Street Chapel 50 years previously, he felt he had, like TS Eliot, come full circle, and

*the end of all our exploring  
will be to arrive where we started  
and know the place for the first time.*

One of the hymns in the service was new to most of us and contained the challenging and consoling lines:

*Love's the clown that mocks the winning, all through the world,  
Midwife of each new beginning, all through the world.  
In the struggles that confound us,  
In the chaos all around us  
Love's wide arms and hope surround us all through the world. (Anna Briggs).*

*Roundelay* brought the service to a resounding close with *O Sing Joyfully* by 17th century composer Adrian Batten.

No sooner had the service ended than the exultant sound of the Silver Bell Jazz Band, playing the first of their repertoire of *trad.* Numbers, emanated from the Percival Suite where the celebrations continued in a more secular mode. And what could be more Unitarian than that! (This was, in a way, picking up from a *Farewell to John* lunchtime concert held two days previously, to mark his retirement. A musical miscellany performed by a few of the musicians who had played over the last ten years in the monthly Friday Lunchtime Recitals he had organised.)

Seventy people – members of the congregation, Unitarians from farther afield, John's family and well-wishers from



# Street Church

among the groups that meet at Cross Street Chapel, enjoyed a splendid meal created by the versatile Alan Myerscough, with a little help from his friends.

Speeches and toasts delivered or proposed by Kathleen Mills our senior member, Geoffrey Head, Honorary Member of the General Assembly and chair of the Chapel trustees, Steve Dick, GA Chief Executive,



John Midgley

and Ann Peart, Chair of the congregation, sustained the conviviality. Ann presented John with a number of gifts from us all, some 'worth their weight'. John responded with a few gifts to keep the chapel in good working order (like door-wedges and a litter-picker!) as well as a new chalice, made of wood, as a stand-by for the fragile glass one he had presented 10 years previously.

Current Chapel secretary Peter Sampson expressed everyone's feelings with a spirited rendition of *I've been to a Marvellous Party*, by Noel Coward. And the band played on ... What a wonderful day it was!

*Peter Sampson is a member at Cross Street Chapel, Manchester.*

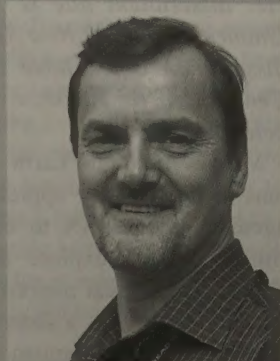
## A prayer with a history

*This is a prayer written originally for John Midgley's installation at Cross Street by the Rev Celia Midgley. She spoke it again, representing the GA as president, at John's retirement service.*

God of community small and large  
Bless us gathered here this day.  
Bring us to fellowship one with another  
and make of us one body in faith.  
Open our eyes to the beauty of buildings,  
houses of worship for art and prayer.  
Open our hearts to the dignity of people,  
singing alike their sorrows and their joys.  
Give us gratitude for past generations  
and ministry in unbroken line.  
Give us confidence in a brave future  
with vision from a new chalice flame.  
May this circle give us heart,  
and love for every home congregation.  
May ties of affection bind us in loyalty  
to a wider circle of caring and belonging.  
May we cherish the ties that bind.  
Help us to grow in love and faithfulness.  
Make us glad in our gathering today.  
Amen.

## Chris Goacher speaks at Derby Cathedral

As part of the University of Derby Graduation day Celebrations, and in his role as Unitarian faith advisor to the university, the Rev Chris Goacher spoke in Derby Cathedral as part of the Thanksgiving Service. Under the title of "Listening to the Wisdom of the communities of faiths", Chris spoke these words:



The Rev Chris Goacher

'Unitarians have long fought for the right of the individual conscience in matters of religion and faith, and the free search for truth; and have long encouraged the growth of organizations which have sustained and promoted educational development through life such as public libraries, professional institutes, universities and colleges.

'William Ellery Channing, the founding father of Unitarianism in the United States wrote:

"I call that mind free which masters the senses, and which recognizes its own reality and greatness: Which passes life not in asking what it shall eat or drink, but in hungering, thirsting and seeking after righteousness.

"I call that mind free which jealously guards its intellectual rights and powers, which does not content itself to a passive or hereditary faith: Which opens itself to light whencesoever it may come; which receives new truth as an angel from heaven.

"I call that mind free which is not passively framed by outward circumstances, and is not the creature of accidental impulse: Which discovers everywhere the radiant signatures of the infinite spirit and in them finds help to its own spiritual enlargement. "I call that mind free which protects itself against the usurpations of society, and which does not cower to human opinion: Which refuses to be the slave or tool of the many or of the few, and guards its empire over itself as nobler than the empire of the world. "I call that mind free which resists the bondage of habit, which does not mechanically copy the past, nor live on in its old virtues: But which listens for new and higher monitions of conscience, and rejoices to pour itself forth in fresh and higher exertions.

"I call that mind free which sets no bounds to its love, which, wherever they are seen delights in virtue and sympathizes with suffering: Which recognizes in all human beings the image of God and the rights of God's children, and offers itself up a willing sacrifice to the cause of humankind."

'Today, for our Graduates, may feel a little like an ending but in reality it is only the beginning of the next stage of their journey. May God bless the work of our minds and hearts; may the open and free search for truth be our life long goal and ambition, for the betterment of humankind the world over. Amen.'



# Study offers window on UESN beliefs

*Jo Rogers recently completed an MA in Religious Studies at Lancaster University for which she received a merit.*

*Her dissertation title is 'Unitarian Earth Spirit Network: Unitarian? Pagan? New Age?' A bound copy of the complete dissertation is available in the library at the Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow. An excerpt from the conclusion is below.*

Most Unitarian Earth Spirit Networkers are Unitarians at heart. They appreciate the opportunity and encouragement, via UESN, to experiment with Pagan ideas and rituals, and to explore aspects of holistic-self activities. However, the great majority value the rootedness of Unitarianism and see it as a secure place from which to investigate, especially as Unitarianism itself accepts uncertainty, that people's lives are spiritual journeys and that individual beliefs may change. As one of the basic tenets of Unitarianism is reason, Networkers also feel safe from an intellectual point of view. Although many are critical of the current Unitarian Object, which they see as unnecessarily prescriptive in its phrases referring to the Christian tradition and to God, they nevertheless identify strongly with the movement and appreciate its openness. Others particularly value their Unitarian Christian heritage. Networkers also trust its members to be 'Reasonable' and thus not to go wildly off the rails on a whim!

Many would like to see more emotion, intuition, physical participation and creativity in worship than has been the Unitarian norm, a desire which is fulfilled by the Network when UESN meets, and a form of worship which in turn is being slowly adopted in some aspects of the Unitarian movement in this country.

UESN is further appreciated as being part of the larger movement in that UESN members may already know, or at least know of, other members in the group when they join, a fact which gives them added security. Networkers are very interested in many traditions of Paganism, although most do not follow any one tradition.

A handful belong to the Pagan Federation or to Druidry but these are the minority, and some of them notwithstanding describe themselves as primarily Unitarian.

Few members, however, feel the need to join another specifically pagan organisation and apparently gain sufficient support from UESN. The majority of Networkers carry out their own private pagan practices, usually inside their own homes or gardens; these range from setting up symbols and decorations to mark the changing seasons or special pagan festivals to carrying out their own rituals, but essentially alone. As Networkers are generally widely-spaced geographically, their aloneness is not necessarily from choice; nevertheless it is not enough of a problem for members to seek out local groups of a pagan nature. They are in the main 'Hedgewitches' or 'Unipags'.

UESN, with its non-adversarial nature and its roots grounded in the Unitarian tradition, gives members sufficient encouragement, confidence and support. Most Networkers have experienced at least one aspect of New Age holistic activity or therapy, and a few clearly lead a holistic-self lifestyle. The search for the 'authentic self' as written about by the philosopher Charles Taylor is tempered by Unitarian James Martineau's emphasis on 'conscience' and, again, by Unitarianism's em-



*Jo Rogers*

phasis on 'Reason'. Members are indeed looking for self-fulfilment, but see Unitarianism as the 'horizon' of what is important, namely its history, its ethos as defined in the 2001 Object, and its slogan of 'Freedom - Reason - Tolerance'. Thence derives their support: Freedom to experiment; Reason to underpin their beliefs and practices; and mutual Tolerance whereby UESN is generally accepted within Unitarianism. In turn, members value their Unitarian roots even though they may be critical of certain of its priorities.

Members rely on their own experience of alternative therapies and activities to decide 'what works for them' and, in George Chrystides's words 'to discern between imaginative alternative spirituality on the one hand and superstitious nonsense on the other.'

Again, Unitarianism's approach towards spirituality is supportive in the domain of the holistic-self; it is, like the New Age movement, impatient of meta-narratives which do not have contemporary significance and, also like the New Age movement, encourages the individual to work out her/his own spirituality. This may well be described as the 'pick 'n mix' syndrome, but at the same time 'N'Uni-Age' members are finding their own ways towards what is often a melding together of many traditions and ideas into a coherent synthesis. Johanna Heather Stuckey's categories of feminist theology may also be usefully adapted here to analyse the attitudes of UESN members to traditional Unitarianism.

Based on my study, a few are 'Revisionist' for they accept the Unitarian status quo and see UESN as a useful adjunct to it. Most however are either 'Renovationist' or 'Revolutionary' in that they reject the continued emphasis on Liberal Christianity; they alter the symbols, language and practices traditionally used, and bring in imagery from pagan and holistic-self sources. None are 'Rejectionists'. Unitarianism rules!

Members pursue essentially personal constructions and translations of their available data and experience, and many successfully marry elements of Unitarianism, Paganism and New Age. Although UESN is still seen by some Unitarians as an organisation which is not fulfilling the traditional role of Unitarianism, it is also apparent that the Unitarian movement itself in this country is changing and becoming less prosaic and more experiential in approach.

How much of this change is informed by UESN practices, or how much UESN has been influenced by changes within Unitarianism, is outside the scope of this dissertation. However, it would appear that UESN is fulfilling an important role within this change which may well enable Unitarianism to continue with new appeal in the post-modern 21st century.

*Jo Rogers is a member of the Kendall congregation and the Unitarian Earth Spirit Network. For more information on the network see [www.unitariansocieties.org.uk](http://www.unitariansocieties.org.uk)*



# Reaching back for contemporary spirituality

By Margaret Kirk

It is unwise to generalise about what is going on in Unitarian congregations. I made the foolish mistake of doing so many years ago, when, based on my own very limited experience, I believed that all Unitarians had been brought up on a diet of Will Hayes' particular kind of universalism, with good measures of William Hazlitt thrown in...! How wrong could I be and how much re-orienting was required! My only excuse was that I was young at the time.

But there has been something afoot for a while now – quite a long while – which most congregations will have been absorbing in a kind of drip feed, osmosis-like fashion and doing with it what they will: embracing it, maybe; cautiously selecting the bits they're comfortable with and rejecting the rest; indeed, perhaps, giving it a very wide berth. I'm speaking of the emergence of a form of contemporary spirituality which finds its inspiration from a wide range of beliefs and practices and sits uneasily alongside organised religion. Its style and its content is very different.

It is more informal: outward form has been dispensed with. It often eschews God language, whilst being engaged in a personal exploration of what God means. Its content seems to flow seamlessly from experience and discovery and is fuelled by a deep dissatisfaction with existing religious and political paradigms. It reaches back for its inspiration to spiritual practices that pre-date much organised religion; shamanism, Wicca, indigenous tribal practices, astrology. All manner of esoteric belief is explored. It represents an outpouring of spiritual hunger, untutored, spontaneous, sometimes raw and infantile. But the conversations and explorations around these diverse ideas comes from a very authentic place where people meet to discover something that has been missing: churches have failed to provide spiritual nourishment and the secular world offers little more than the emptiness of consumerism.

It feels like the sea wall of organised religion has been breached, so long a powerful edifice that kept in check other forms of spirituality and rather like that other wall that divided Germany after the second world war, once torn down, the energy for something different raced away with itself, flowing with its own momentum into all kinds of hidden coves and crannies, picking up all that it can find, both the detritus and the precious gems.

Unitarians have a paradoxical relationship to this emerging spirituality. At one level we engage with it because we honour the spirit of freedom – freedom of conscience – and all this means to us in our individual quest for understanding. At another level we are deeply suspicious because some of its practices and beliefs fly in the face of that rationality which has historically defined us. What are we to make of it?

The poet TS Eliot tells us 'the sea has many voices, many gods and many voices'. He also tells us that the pattern is 'new in every moment'. (*Four Quartets*) There are few things we manage to sort out conclusively in our lives and most of them, with a few important exceptions, stop being interesting once we've sorted them. We can throw up our hands in dismay, settle for what we know, for what feels comfortable or we can begin to make sense of what's going on and how it impinges upon us. Our task is to discover what it is about this new pattern that is enriching and use our reason, our good sense, to discern what is false. What we mustn't do is let it pass us by.

Contemporary spirituality cannot simply be dismissed as New Age mumbo jumbo. It is a search for connection with the spirit. There has always been this hunger for connection with the sacred but right now our sense of alienation is acute. John O'Donoghue, whose writings are profound and whose recent death has saddened many people, tells us that 'the old shelters are gone and around us is the severe cold breeze of isolation. This has made our need for belonging even more intense. We search continually for connection.' (*Exploring Our Hunger to Belong*) Some churches exploit the loneliness, the hunger to belong, the desire to connect. We don't, but it is part of our tradition to gather people into community and offer each person that worth and dignity and space for the mind and spirit to flow freely. Our history proves how richly we have been rewarded when we honour this process.

There's a well known story about a king who held court each day listening to grievances and dispensing justice. Every day a holy man with the appearance of a beggar would give him some fruit and each day the king graciously thanked him, passed the fruit to a servant who placed it in a store house at the back of the palace. One day he handed it to a monkey instead. When the monkey bit into the fruit a jewel dropped to the floor. The king was astonished and asked what had become of the many gifts of fruit the beggar had given him. When his servant opened the store house he was amazed to discover a heap of jewels glistening amongst all the rotten fruit.

*The Rev Margaret Kirk is minister at York and writes a quarterly column for The Inquirer.*

## WINTER NEWS FROM THE NIGHTINGALE CENTRE COTTAGE HOLIDAYS AT HUCKLOW!

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- Senior Youth Weekend  
29<sup>th</sup> February – 2<sup>nd</sup> March, 2008
- Writing Workshop with Judy Campbell  
10<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2008
- American Quilting Workshop  
14<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2008

Further details from The Nightingale Centre  
Tel 01298 871218 e.mail [info@great-hucklow.org.uk](mailto:info@great-hucklow.org.uk)



# Letters to the Editor

## Newcomers can teach denomination how to grow

To the Editor:

I am sad that Graham Williams ('Newcomer to Unitarianism', *Inquirer* 26 January) should feel ashamed of not knowing about the Unitarian movement. It may be – he doesn't say – that he feels he ought to have made more effort to find us. But it may be that we, the Denomination, ought to have made ourselves easier to find. In the latter case, it is we who should feel ashamed – ashamed that someone has spent 'very many years' seeking us out.

I know of a similar instance in which Jane (not her real name) left her orthodox church and found a Unitarian one 40 years later!!!

I am sure that Graham and Jane's experiences in their 'wilderness years' are very relevant to our Growth Initiative. So too are the experiences of all those of us who are not born and bred Unitarians. If we can relate to these experiences, then perhaps we can empathise with unknown searchers and so be more willing and prepared to help them to find us.

So, it would be good for all of us to hear from 'incomers' about how they

came to us.

How did they move from their previous situation to Unitarianism?

What motivated them?

What held them back?

How did they feel during this time of change and searching?

How did they feel when they found us?

How do they feel now?

Do they make comparisons between the past and the present?

Looking forward to reading lots of contributions.

**Peter Whitham**

Stockton

## Response: Don't promote injustice

In his letter 'Roots of anti-Semitism are deep and intertwined' (*Inquirer* 26.1.08) Michael Bartlett's foray into history has led him, via some strange places and even stranger companions to a conclusion that has no basis in fact but could well serve to replace one injustice with another. It could also encourage a growing tendency to Islamophobia in our society.

After beginning by inviting us to share his feelings of guilt about colonialism and what he calls absurdities and iniquities in Christian history, he concludes that 'Islam (sic) took anti-Semitism from Christianity (sic) and Christianity later took some anti-Semitic practices from Islam.' He thus neatly divests himself and the reader of our Christian guilt by offloading half the responsibility for 'the revolting consequences' of anti-Semitism onto Muslims. Bartlett's argument does not hold water. The authorities he cites in support are:

**a. A book – 'Why the Jews?'** – described in [www.christianbook.com](http://www.christianbook.com) as containing 'new insights and unparalleled perspectives on some of the most recent pressing developments in the contemporary world including:

- The replicating of Nazi anti-Semitism in the Arab world
- The pervasive anti-Zionism/anti-Semitism on university campuses
- The rise of anti-Semitism in Europe
- Why the US and Israel are linked in the minds of anti-Semites.'

(You would expect a book, so described, to serve the purpose of denigrating Muslims as, indeed, it does.)

**b. An online archive of mediaeval source documents.**

A then-research student at Fordham University, currently engaged in an online campaign to label Richard Dawkins an anti-Semite, compiled this some years ago. In contrast, scholars in this field generally agree that the 'Pact of Umar' was indeed devised to protect non-Muslim religious groups in Syria. Its earliest surviving form is a letter from the Christian community to the Caliph Umar. Among other things, it gave them protection and recognition in society. According to Professor Mark R Cohen of Princeton University, mutual resentment between Jews and Muslims is a rather new

phenomenon: ([http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show\\_article.php/\\_c-478/\\_nr-77/i.html](http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php/_c-478/_nr-77/i.html)).

**c. Two commercial encyclopaedias.** As Michael Bartlett himself quotes, 'the Encyclopaedia Britannica cites Morocco as maybe having the first ghetto'; 'The Jewish Encyclopaedia suggests Prague.'

**d. The Gospel of John.** Michael Bartlett has Jesus saying to the Jews 'You are of your father, the Devil, and your will is to do your father's desires.' A reading from 8:39 onwards, reveals that he was addressing the Pharisees, who wanted to kill him.

**e. The Qur'an.** In similar fashion, he pretends that the quote from the Qu'ran was applied to 'some Jews'. In fact a full reading clearly shows that he was referring to apostatising 'people of the Book' i.e. Jews and Christians who had renounced their faith.

In respect of these last two, Bartlett has supplied his own context. He has taken two 'bald statements' from scripture and applied them exclusively to some or all Jews. At the same time by saying 'apologists can argue that both these quotations have mitigating contexts', he seeks to disallow the reader from understanding them in their true context. The word 'mitigate' presumes guilt and leads us to ask who his 'apologists' would be apologising for – Jesus? Mohammed? 'The Almighty'? Leopold Weiss? John?

Where Bartlett's arguments are at their weakest, the language becomes most value-laden. The use of words such as 'disgusting', 'revolting' 'ugly', 'evil', 'cruel' does not enhance an historical analysis but rather seeks to influence the reader by appealing to the emotions. The use of 'our' and 'we' throughout his letter presumes a complicity on the part of the reader which we trust none would want to share. We are new to Unitarianism, drawn to attend services by the open-minded and inclusive nature of the fellowship offered. We feel Michael Bartlett's letter, whatever his intention, constitutes an invitation to prejudice, exclusion and collusion in injustice.

**Alan Goater and Mirian Walton**

Shrewsbury



# News in brief

## Newington Green celebrates tercentenary

The Newington Green congregation in North London will celebrate the tercentenary of its building in 2008. It is understood that the church is the oldest nonconformist building still in use in London, though the present pedimented façade dates from 1860.

Various celebratory events will take place from May to November, including an event on Saturday 21 June when members of other LDPA congregations will also be present.

This year's Richard Price Memorial Lecture will take place on Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> November 2008. The speaker will be Evan Davis, who has served as the BBC's economics editor since 2001. Further details of all events will be available from the congregation nearer the time. Their website will be found at: [www.new-unity.org](http://www.new-unity.org)

## Todmorden church memorial stone found

Some months ago, a stone dating from 1912 was found during renovation at an address in Rawtenstall, Lancashire. Here is the text of the stone:

*'Laid by Rev. Arthur Fox, MA, Todmorden. July 20th 1912 to commemorate the Unitarian Martyrs B. Legate and Ed. Wightman burned for heresy 1612.'*

Bartholomew Legate was burnt at the stake in Smithfield, London on 18 March 1612, and Edward Wightman at Lichfield on 11 April 1612. The Rawtenstall congregation has negotiated with members of the Historic Chapels Trust in Todmorden that the stone should be housed in a side-chapel at Todmorden Unitarian Church, where the Rev Arthur Fox was the minister in 1912.

There is a new momentum at Todmorden Church due in part to the carols and readings service now organised each December, fostering cooperation between The Historic Chapels Trust and Unitarians, and so we feel happy for it to be housed there. The venue is much loved by former members of the church, and ventures such as the carol service mean that the church is now becoming familiar to newer Unitarians in our northern districts.

It is also clear that some publicity will arise from the finding of the stone, once a date is set for its removal from Rawtenstall's grounds to the interior at Todmorden. The 'installation' may take place in March or April.

And here's something to stir the soul - Historic Chapels Trust members of Todmorden are sufficiently excited that they plan to make the side-chapel a centre for historical information and artefacts concerned with religious dissent in this part of the country! For those interested in the event, a date for the 'installation' will be circulated later.

Website (Historic Chapels Trust): [www.hct.org.uk/chapel-3todmorden.html](http://www.hct.org.uk/chapel-3todmorden.html) (this links through to the Todmorden church's own website)

*Myrna Michell, Lay Pastor, Rawtenstall Unitarians*

## £130 raised for CHASTE

Bill Collier, from Devon, won the 'Towns and Villages in Yorkshire Quiz' organised by Sheila Barwick. The quiz raised £130 for the Unitarian Women's League project to support the work of CHASTE to end sex trafficking. Sheila offers her thanks to everyone who supported the quiz.

## Unitarian Youth Programme events – 2008

29 February - 2 March 2008: Senior Weekend (ages 14-17)



*The Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow. Photo by John Hewerdine*

23-25 May 2008: Inter Weekend (ages 11-14)

11-15 August 2008: Five Days Away (ages 11-16)

10-12 October 2008: Junior Weekend (ages 7-11)

31 October - 2 November 2008: Senior Weekend (ages 14-17)

14-16 November 2008: Inter Weekend (ages 11-14)

All the above events take place at The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire SK17 8RH. Tel: (01298) 871 218

For further information, contact the Rev John Harley, GA Youth Co-ordinator, 23 Hamilton Road, London SE27 9RZ. Tel: (020) 8670 9280. Mobile: 07985 900 935. E-mail: [jharley@unitarian.org.uk](mailto:jharley@unitarian.org.uk)

## Quilting workshop at Nightingale Centre

An American Quilting Workshop with the Rev Dr Judy Campbell is planned for The Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow, Buxton, Derbyshire on Fri 14<sup>th</sup> - Sun 16<sup>th</sup> March. All inclusive rate starts at £115 per person. Meals and materials provided. Further information from Julie or Linda, phone 01298 871218 or e-mail [info@great-hucklow.org.uk](mailto:info@great-hucklow.org.uk) The Nightingale Centre at Great Hucklow, Buxton, Derbyshire SK17 8RH



*Members of John Pounds Memorial Church, Old Portsmouth, enjoying afternoon tea following the "Butterfly Sunday Service" at Ditchling Old Meeting House on Sunday 1 July. The group includes Mrs Betty Calderara whose family has had an association with the Old Meeting House for over 80 years.*





## Derby gets a new banner

At the Christmas service on 23rd December, the Rev Chris Goacher from Friar Gate Chapel, Derby was presented with the chapel's new banner by Janet Granger, a congregation member. The banner's design had been agreed upon a few weeks earlier by the congregation, but Janet, who made the banner for the Chapel, had expected it to take a lot longer than the 10 days that it actually took to stitch.

Chris said: "I have wanted a banner for Derby Chapel for a long time, but as I am not very good with a needle myself, the idea has never before come to anything!"

The banner is now displayed in the Chapel on its special stand which was made by Janet's husband, Chris. It will be used 'in public' for the first time at the banner parade at the GA annual conference in March.

## National post for the Rev Chris Wilson

The Rev Chris Wilson, who co-ordinates Cambridge Regional College's Multi-Faith Chaplaincy, has been appointed as a Free Church representative to the National Council of Faiths and Beliefs in Further Education. His appointment was supported by Anglicans and others within this new body. This new body, known as 'FBFE' was established by the ecumenical Christian body, NEAFE (National Ecumenical Agency for Further Education) and the non-Christian FIFE (Faith in Further Education Forum). This new body, which is part-funded by the public funds, will be the effective lead body for Multi-Faith Chaplaincy in Further Education.

The new body will have two co-chairs. One is Ann Limb, a past principal of Cambridge Regional College, and who is also an active Quaker. The other, Harjinder Singh is an active representative of the Sikh community and strongly committed to



Chris Wilson

multi-faith dialogues.

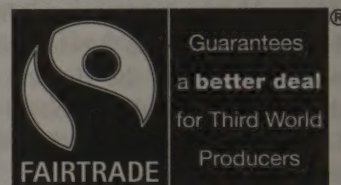
Multi-Faith Chaplaincy is becoming more important in further education colleges, not least as the government sees it as being an important mechanism for promoting community cohesion, as well as encouraging debate and understanding between students of diverse faith and belief identities.

The National Council of FBFE has oversight of this agenda in the sector. Chris, a Unitarian and Free Christian Minister, and co-ordinator of the College's Multi-Faith Chaplaincy, said: "I am delighted to be appointed to this council. I look forward to working with representatives of all faiths and beliefs to find ways to promote community, respect and understanding, within our college communities."

The Council will meet three times per year at Church House, in London. Chris currently combines his role as part-time college chaplain, and multi-faith chaplaincy co-ordinator at Cambridge Regional College, with his position as part-time minister to Old Meeting, Great Yarmouth and with his responsibilities as a national officer for the Association of Teachers and Lecturers. He is the moderator of the Unitarian Christian Association.

## Bury Church gains fair-trade status

According to The Fair Trade Foundation, there are just under 400 churches in this country which have Fair Trade status.



Bury Unitarian Church, in Lancashire, has recently added to this number and now has a certificate to confirm that it is a Fair Trade Church.

The application for Fair Trade status was made in order to affirm the church's commitment to a worthy cause; it now has to promise to promote Fair Trade issues: through posters and other literature, via its website, by selling goods, and by using fairly-traded tea and coffee at all events for which it is responsible.

Bury has just entered its fifth year of selling Traidcraft and other fairly-traded items, and trade continues to grow; the success of the stall, open on Sundays after the morning service, is increasing all the time and support from members of the congregation has been excellent.

Anne Mills, the Traidcraft organiser from the beginning, reports that, in 2006, the church sold £2,500 worth of goods, and 2007 will have almost certainly exceed that amount. Traidcraft recently participated in the church's Celebration of Christmas Trees, with its own decorated tree, and by running the stall for the duration of the event.

Anne commented: "Supporting Traidcraft is worthwhile because the funds raised are returned to the people who produce the goods in the first place; they are encouraged to help themselves so that their skills improve, as does their quality of life. I am very grateful to my congregation for its support and thrilled by our achievement."

**Fair Trade Fortnight starts this week.**  
**For more information see [www.fair-trade.org.uk](http://www.fair-trade.org.uk)**